

Kenosis

Did Christ Shed Off His Divinity in the Incarnation?

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Introduction

When the discussion around the person and nature of Jesus Christ (*Yahushua Mashiyach*) is raised, many insights come to the fore as well as many hair-raising heresies exposed by that same token. In a day when varying views command an equal footing and attention, there is need to once again retrace, affirm or redefine the person and nature of Christ (*Mashiyach*). In a sense, the early church thoroughly dealt with this issue during the Christological controversy through the fourth and fifth centuries but from the look of things that matter was not totally laid to rest given its recent resurrection. Who exactly is Jesus Christ? What happened when He incarnated? Is the incarnation Biblical at all? What is Christ's hypostatic nature? This paper attempts not to deal with all issues related to Christology but focuses on the Incarnation and its implications in relation to the person and nature of Christ.

What the Incarnation is

By the term "*incarnation*" is meant that fact and idea that God (*YHWH*) entered time and creation in the person of His son *Yahushua Mashiyach*. Jesus Christ was the promised Messiah that was born of a virgin into this world for the purposes of saving God's people from their sin. The idea of the divine becoming man is what is at issue in the discussion of the incarnation. Bonsall (1982)¹, puts it like this: "*The term incarnation...means the doctrine that at a given point in time God took upon Himself human Flesh and, with it, human nature.*" The Bible is very clear of this fact of God taking on flesh to redeem a sinful helpless people. The Puritans repeatedly used to deeply muse over this matter a lot because it was such a lofty truth that should melt every heart in gratitude to God. Moreover, the incarnation does refer to Jesus, God the Son, adding to Himself a sinless human nature to the extent of subjecting Himself to human limitations, emotion and even death on a shameful cross. It was bad enough to be born as a healthy

¹ Although Arminianistic in some aspects of his theology, Bonsall none the less makes a good case on the incarnation.

human baby, but it was even worse to die the death of a criminal for a crime he did not commit.

The Biblical foundation of the Incarnation

The incarnation (i.e. Latin *in caro* for: *in flesh*) is a doctrine that has been documented in scripture, commencing with the Old Testament types and shadows as well as prophecies right through the New Testament where we see the actual reality is revealed when the saviour is born, grows, enters public ministry and eventually crucified, only to rise on the third day to be glorified (Bonsall, 1982). Thus, in the Bible, the incarnation is an expected feature all designed for the salvation of God's elect for without a perfect sacrifice, people would still be in their sins as Hebrews 8 and following states. What then, are the Biblical evidences pointing to the incarnation? Though the evidences prior to the incarnation abound, only a few are picked to buttress this discussion. Firstly, in Deuteronomy 18, a prophet is promised that would come to redeem God's people. This Deliverer, at face value, appears to be a physical potent being but in actual fact points to the Deliverer of people from sin. Next, we read in Isaiah 7, 9, 52 and 53 of a child who was to be born of a virgin and would rule the world as mighty God, everlasting Father and Prince of peace though in time would be crucified to bear the iniquities of all people. Finally, before the Messiah is born, 400 years before his birth, Malachi talks about a Deliverer who would come in the Spirit of Elijah (Malachi 4:5, 6). In the New Testament, the long-awaited saviour is born in a Manger, quite contrary to what was expected though in the right town of David. From birth, *Yahushua* is a fugitive, grows and becomes the saviour with confirmations from John the Baptiser as well as apostles and people around the cross when He is crucified and actually dies. On the third day, Jesus rises from the dead, appears to many disciples and eventually is taken up into heaven where He sits at the right hand of the Father, with the glory he had before the world begun (John 17:5). At the end of time, He will personally return to judge rather than to save the world. It needs to be mentioned here that the incarnation presupposes great humiliation on the part of God the Son. Not only is He humiliated but throughout suffers until He redeems man. He is, for a fact, *Ebed Yahweh*, the suffering servant of God (Cullmann, 1963). The Epistles abound with allusions to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ although equally allude to his incarnation. A text like I Timothy 3:16 wonderfully summarizes what or who Jesus was and what he became before returning to his glory following the incarnation, death and resurrection. Let us read this in the 1984 NIV rendering:

Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great:
He appeared in a body,
was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels,
was preached among the nations,

was believed on in the world,
was taken up in glory.

The Son's incarnation or attendant implications were not forced into scripture or invented by mortals. It is deeply embedded in the very Holy writ!

The implications of the Incarnation and *Kenosis* theory understanding

With God the Son becoming man, what exactly happened to His being and nature? Did He, for a while, relinquish His divinity only to take it up again after completing the work of atonement? Theologians have argued either way across Church history² but from the evidence adduced in or from scripture, it is clear that when God the Son incarnated, He never, for a moment, ceased to be God but rather simply took on flesh so that he could be a fit saviour of the world, with an ability to voluntarily submit to the just standards of God, satisfy the law, shed blood, die and rise from the dead, without committing any sin what so ever (Cairns, 2013). It was therefore necessary for Jesus to become man for propitiation and expiation to take place. Furthermore, Jesus had two natures³ resident in one person, though these natures remained unmixed (Barrett, 1999; Cullmann, 1963). He was fully man at the same time fully divine. His body was tangibly real⁴, authentic, genuine and not a phantom as *Docetism* and other heresies teach. The incarnation therefore made the atonement feasible for which humans should be eternally grateful. In Philippians 2:5-8, we see a classic case of what exactly transpired in the Immaculate Conception as Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary. What exactly happened in the incarnation? Is *kenosis* even possible? For clarity, the term *kenosis*, according to Cairns (2013), has the following root and implication:

The term kenosis comes from the Greek verb ekenosen, used in Philippians 2:7 and translated "made [Himself] of no reputation" by the Authorised version (i.e. KJV). However, the American Revised Version translated it "emptied [Himself]," a translation which B.B. Warfield (1851-1921) called a mistranslation. The use of "emptied" reflects the views of a School of thought which developed in the mid-19th century.

The idea of *kenosis* itself, as used by the 19th century school of thought that Warfield combats, carries the connotation that God the Son relinquished His

² David T, William has written an excellent paper synthesizing various views over time in his well thought out paper "Kenosis and the Nature of the Persons in the Trinity" in which he successfully demonstrates that Jesus, in the incarnation, never ceased to be God but self-limited Himself, which in itself was great humiliation. Although some parts of this great paper remain unclear, giving a sense the author (i.e. Williams) attempts to accommodate (if not refute) the Open theism views, it is an excellent read worth reviewing several times. We highly recommend it to would be readers given the great synopsis on historical views in one campus.

³ i.e. What Theologians refer to as the hypostatic nature of Christ.

⁴ I John 1:1

divinity until He had completed the work of redemption and then triumphantly reclaimed His divinity afterwards, as John 1:1, 1:14 then 17:5 seem to suggest, so that school posits. Warfield rose to the occasion and argued against this heretical view⁵. The fact is: Jesus humbled himself, despite His remaining divine to redeem us and so should we. *Kenotic* theory, thought or proposition is therefore unbiblical. The book of Hebrews, in connection with Leviticus, makes a great and clear commentary on the necessity of the atonement through the blood of this priest-Jesus Christ.

Jesus: Before and After the Incarnation

What was the Son like before the incarnation? What about after the incarnation? From Biblical evidence, the Son pre-existed before time, created the world and will exist after time is past. Passages like John 1:1; 17:5; Philippians 2:5-8; Colossians 1:18; Hebrews 1:1-4 all attest to the fact that Jesus was before time begun. In fact, these self-same passages clearly state that Jesus is eternal God! What about after the incarnation? Two things must be said about The Son. Firstly, when He incarnated, the divine nature took on flesh without relinquishing his divinity but voluntarily limited aspects of Himself to a human body (William, 2004; Watson, 1958; Briggs, 2014). The second that needs to be said is that after death, Jesus rose from the dead and is now exalted to the highest place, the position He held before voluntarily deciding to redeem His people, as we learn from the economic Trinity. From Heaven, seated at the right hand of God, Jesus ever lives to intercede for the saints. As to whether He laid aside that body, theologians are not agreed but suffice it to say that He ever lives to intercede, showing the nail prints as a sign of His atonement for sin. Thus, to do this eternal work, Jesus must have that body to all eternity. It is worth noting here that Jesus never evolved into the divine after his atoning work but He was always glorified even before the foundations of the world.

Jesus: After the Resurrection and Glorification

As hinted at in the previous section, *Yahushua* actually rose from the dead and ascended to Heaven to return as a King and Judge of the world. He is glorified with the glory He had before the world was (John 17: 5; Cullmann, 1963). He has a physical body not a phantom or ghost body as was proved in that room shortly after the resurrection (Luke 24:36-43; John 20:25, 27)! From the evidence from

⁵ Ralph P. Martin (1987), adds his voice in describing *kenosis* in the following helpful words: “*As he did not clutch at equality with his Father he perforce accepted the consequences of this renunciation. But made himself nothing, which is, more literally, ‘but emptied himself,’* heauton ekenosen- *a phrase which has given its name to the so-called ‘kenosis’ theory of incarnation- is best interpreted in the light of the words which immediately follow...The present verse...rather teaches that ‘kenosis or self-emptying was his taking the servant’s form, and this involved the necessary limitation of his glory which he laid aside in order that he might be born in human likeness...’* (p104).

scripture, Jesus ever intercedes for the saints in that body that was raised from the dead, a living eternal sacrifice as it were (Hebrews 7:25)!

Objections to the Incarnation

Some people, within and without the Christian (*HaMashiyachim*) circle object to the incarnation. They argue that the idea of the divine being becoming man, and yet simultaneously retaining divinity is unbiblical and simply not feasible. They say that it is unbiblical in the sense that the writers of scripture were heavily influenced by Greek mythology & theology that tended to teach that the divinities would turn into human beings to execute an act, and thus at times die in the process (Williams, 2004; Pinnock, 2001; Bonsall, 1982; JW, 2015). This school of thought therefore argues that the scripture never should integrate stuff from pagan sources as Christians of today tend to interpret scripture. They would rather hold that *Yahushua* was just a mere human being period! They further argue that the incarnation is not feasible because how can the eternal divine being become like one of His creatures? How and why should God even die the death of a criminal? And if He truly died, how could He rise from the dead? Medically, it is not possible for a dead person to rise from the dead? Finally, they argue that if *Yahushua* was fully man, how could He be fully divine at the same time, given that all men are born sinners? Could it be that Jesus inherited the sinful nature and thus was not a perfect man contrary to what many pundits claim? These and many other arguments arise as one delves into the matters related to the incarnation, with some theologians totally rejecting the virgin birth!

What Others Have Said About the Incarnation and *Kenosis*

Many have written on the incarnation as relates to the Incarnation and of course, *Kenosis*. A few come to mind at this stage. The first is what we find in the Apostle's Creed that states clearly that Jesus is both divine and human, the uncreated one who is instead the Creator. One cannot help thinking about that great champion Athanasius when dealing with the divinity of Christ. The Creeds and Confessions of the Church right through the centuries affirm the truth of the incarnation as well as the fact that Jesus had a dual nature, one divine and the other human. The Puritans, as earlier intimated, meditated much upon this matter of incarnation as relates to *kenosis*. One fine Puritan, for example, was Thomas Watson, who clearly elucidated this truth in his classic expositions as encapsulated in: *A Body of Divinity* legendary volume. One of his landmark statements in the said work says something like this around the incarnation: "*it was nothing for the Son of God to become man than for a man to become a frog...*"! See the high views this Puritan had about the God-Man! Other Puritan divines worth reading include Stephen Charnock (*The Attributes of God*) and Charles J. Brown (*The Divine Glory of Christ*). But then, we see aspects of this in the great awakening revivalists after the Puritan era in England. Hymn writers like

Charles Wesley, Doddridge, Cowper and Isaac Watts bring out a wealth of truth pointing to Christ being God and Man at the same time! There are many witnesses to this fact along the corridors of the centuries. In recent times, W.E. Best has given one of the best explanations and descriptions of the *Kenosis*. Yet another is David T. Williams whose paper on *kenosis* focusing on the nature of the persons of the Trinity makes interesting and thought-provoking reading. Williams surveys the developing thoughts around the incarnation in relation to the Trinity, whether Christ's taking on flesh did violence to the Trinity's immutability. His conclusion is that Jesus never ceased to be divine but merely self-limited, freely choosing not to exercise his divine attributes, although he could have. This, in Williams' thinking is great humility from which authentic Christians ought to learn from the King that gave up all to save man, in that sense emptying himself. Williams is mindful of the leading Open theists like Pinnock and others that posit some views, but presses on to state the correct evangelical position developed over time. He however makes some startling statements suggesting that the creedal views posited by Chalcedon and even earlier confessions about Christ's dual nature or even incarnation have now been refined, some aspects discredited, in part but not in whole, by some current theologians. That's surprising! Another statement Williams makes, while quoting Grudem is that for 1800 years, the idea of *kenosis* as taught by the 19th century theologians Warfield battled against was never once mentioned or talked about, giving the impression that intimation about *kenosis* is a novel idea, although a historical gentleman Apollinarius (Bishop of Laodicea; circa 310-390 AD)⁶ did suggest the idea of Christ having "self-emptied himself in the incarnation" but declared and condemned a heretic. Williams then argues that history and theological thought must be read in its context and time to fully appreciate the thought advanced. Sounds good advice though needs to be threaded with extreme caution none the less. Heresy was wrong then and should be today still. We encourage readers to probe and interact with Williams to fully appreciate his helpful thoughts, with the necessary cautions, of course. In transitioning from Williams, it needs to be said that various translations lend ideas as they are read. The Revised Standard Version (RSV) is one of them. It uses the phrase "emptied himself" in Philippians 2:5 as follows:

"5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."

This has been a source of controversy and dissonance for some theologians allergic to the self-emptying idea because it seems to suggest that for a moment, Jesus ceased to be God in order to sort out the humanity problem and then returned to his former glory. According to this cohort, this suggests a change in the immutable God and thus does violence to God's immutability attribute and

⁶ Refer to: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095419205>, for greater insights into this historical figure and why condemned. Accessed on 30th May, 2022.

nature. But is that what the RSV intends to communicate? What is the spirit in which the original framers and translators intended to communicate their thought? What does the original intend to communicate? Could language dynamics be at play? That said, this and other translations need to be read in context and what they intended to communicate exactly, although language dynamics may alter the perceptions of things and terms. That is not at all to excuse wrong teaching hiding behind terms no! It is merely to highlight this other possibility. Although the RSV states that Jesus "*emptied himself*" and Charles Wesley's hymn "*And can it be*" uses similar language, W.E. Best explains clearly the right understanding and what the version (i.e. RSV) and Wesley correctly meant: that Jesus laid aside⁷ His majesty for Economic Trinitarian purposes not ontologically. *Yahushua* remained God and yet took on flesh. Best's explanation is best!!

Lessons Gleaned from this Consideration

From the reading and research taken, readers come away with many lessons including the following:

1. *Yahushua* is both human and divine-the God-Man!
2. The fact of the incarnation was planned by God and puzzles humans as well as Angels!
3. The *Logos* was never created nor did He relinquish his divinity when He incarnated (Pink, 1932; Best, 1985, 1986).
4. The incarnation is not of human origins nor should it be compared to pagan rites or formulations such as in Hinduism or Greek mythology.
5. For *Yahushua* to fulfil the salvation of His people, He had to become man, passively and actively obey the law, die and rise from the dead.
6. True *HaMashiyachim* accept and hold the virgin birth.
7. The incarnation in no way disrupts our understanding of the Trinity. Neither does this suggest that the immutable God changed in the incarnation. Williams (2004), suggests interpenetration of the persons of the Godhead while discussing *perichoresis*. Interpenetration posits that when one member of the Trinity acts, all the persons act by that token. Further, when the Son incarnated, He never ceased to be God nor did He change in His divine nature. David says it better in the following words:

⁷ Others use the phrase Jesus veiled his nature. Calvin, according to David Williams (2004), would hold the view that "*whereas Jesus could not divest himself of his Godhead, he concealed it for a time (MacLeod, 1998).*"

How could three Persons be totally equal, yet distinct; for once they are distinct, they can surely not be equal? Perchosis or in its closest English equivalent, "Interpenetration", represents the idea that the persons are mutually involved in one another to such a degree that they are equal..."⁸

The Trinity is indivisibly one and yet relational in nature, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

8. Christ's hypostatic nature is a fact: He was both God and man; the God-Man!

Importance and value of this consideration in the Present Day

The Divinity of Christ in relation to His incarnation is an ongoing point of discussion with arguments on either side of the coin. Not only do Christians debate this matter, non-Christian folks join the fray, throwing and hurling all sorts of accusations! Muslims ferociously attack this doctrine which scheme confuses many people, including naïve saints. Thus, a consideration of this subject matter is not only welcome but needed to ensure that the Church remains on the fine rails of scripture whilst attempting to understand the mysteries of this deep doctrine. The view held on the incarnation inevitably affects the view on the Trinity. Second, Christians need to be helped and equipped to not only explain but defend this doctrine for the glory of God. The times demand a thorough grasp and understanding of these fundamental doctrines that have lain ignored and relegated to the side where enemies pick up and dismantle the truth of God. If one buys into the Greco-mythological false allusions to the Trinity, then one can most likely be retrieved out of that ditch only by God the Holy Spirit that illuminates our minds. No amount of human ingenuity or arguments could win the day but God, hence the need to avoid falling into the quagmire in the first place! That said, Christians need to explore this deep mine by reviewing current thinking in light of scripture through journals or discussions. I have found listening to debates between, say Muslims and Christians about the Trinity quite enlightening. Helps me have an idea how people think and why. Additionally, there is need to read the creedal statements, confessions, books or ongoing research work by sound institutes say, the Centre for Apologetics Research (CFAR). In our view, Best and Pink are some of the best minds on this matter at the present time. In his book *Kenosis*, W.E. Best carefully treads where *even Angels fear to tread*, as the Puritans used to say. It is a very delicate subject by one that has been accused of being a hyper-Calvinist by many! It would be advisable though that additional materials be added to this reading list such as one by John Brown, Stewart Elyot and others that have written on this delicate matter. There is need to address this doctrine in our present generation when many mind not what they hold, true or false!

⁸ Page 633.

Conclusion

From the evidence thus far adduced from scripture, it is true that though *Yahushua* took on flesh, he never for a moment ceased to be God. As Charles Wesley has correctly quipped in a hymn, we see the God head veiled in flesh at the humiliation found in the incarnation. The Christian should be ever grateful that God the Son elected to fulfil the full requirements of the law on their behalf so that sinners could become the righteousness of God.

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